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ABSTRACT

Research suggests that quality home literacy activities make a difference in children's reading development. The federally funded Title I program of the Charlotte County, Florida school system promoted the role of parents as reading tutors in a way that supported the district's literacy development goals and philosophy. Parent involvement plans were initiated to enable elementary school parents to incorporate a research-based knowledge of emergent literacy and reading strategies in parent-child home interactions. The result was the Book Checkout Program (BCP), centering on a weekly book checkout activity at Title I elementary school family resource centers which are stocked with a large variety of leveled and chapter books, including books in Spanish for Hispanic families. Staff members guide parents in reading with their children, reinforcing their children's use of reading strategies. For the eight schools (preschool through fifth grade) and one early education center using the BCP, participation increased from 184 students in 1996 to 1,876 in 2002. A program evaluation examined the difference in these outcomes between families with frequent participation (FP) in BCP and families with minimal participation (MP): frequency of parent-child home reading activities, child's attitude toward reading, and child's reading achievement level. Evaluation sample included 792 students in grades 1-5. Data were collected to examine differences between FP and MP in three outcome areas: parent behaviors with children at home, children's attitude toward reading, and children's reading achievement. Findings reveal that children from FP families tended to be more positive about reading in school and more confident when called on to read in class; these children tended to have higher levels of reading achievement than their peers from MP families. (Contains 17 references and 5 tables.) (NKA)

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Empowering Parents as Reading Tutors:

An Example of a Family School Partnership

for Children s Literacy Development

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Empowering Parents as Reading Tutors:
An Example of a Family School Partnership for Children s Literacy Development

Parent involvement is generally perceived as beneficial to children s literacy development. Parents and teachers disagree, however, about the commitment of schools to implementing parent involvement activities: Parents perceive that there are fewer parent involvement activities than teachers perceive there to be (Chen & Chandler, 2001). While teachers adjust to a learning climate that is increasingly impacted by accountability issues, parent involvement remains a largely untapped resource for improving student learning. Research is ongoing as to the kinds of parent involvement that are most helpful to a child s reading development. The identification of effective parent behavior is important to school systems that are attempting to address the perceived lack of parent involvement in children s reading development.

Home Activities and Reading Development

Numerous research findings support a direct relationship between parent involvement in children s education and improved reading achievement (Epstein, Herrick, & Coates, 1996; Hara & Burke, 1998; Shaver & Walls, 1998; Zellman & Waterman, 1998). Evidence suggests that specific types of home education activities, such as reading to children, support children s reading development (Nord, Lennon, & Chandler, 2000; Reaney, Denton, & West, 2002; Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998; Moss & Fawcett, 1995). In addition, the quality of parent-child interactions is important for children s literacy development (Saracho, 1997; Zellman & Waterman, 1998). Other findings underscore the importance of a home literacy environment in supporting children s reading progress (Reaney, Denton, & West, 2002). Some researchers have concluded that improved reading progress for students can result from parents being

taught more specific instructional methods (Thurston & Dasta, 1990; Leah & Siddall, 1990; Ebey, Marchand-Martella, & Nelson, 1999). In summary, research suggests that quality home literacy activities make a difference in children s reading development.

Parents as Reading Tutors

In light of these issues, the federally funded Title 1 program, of the Charlotte County, Florida, school system attempted to promote the role of parents as reading tutors in a way that supported the district s literacy development goals and philosophy. Parent involvement plans were initiated to enable elementary school parents to incorporate a research-based knowledge of emergent literacy and reading strategies in parent-child home interactions. The result was the development of the Book Checkout Program (BCP), which centers on a weekly book checkout activity at Title 1 elementary school family resource centers. Each center is staffed by a parent involvement paraprofessional and a family social worker. The atmosphere of the parent center is designed to be parent-friendly and conducive to conversation between parents and staff and between parents and children. The center is stocked with a large variety of leveled and chapter books, including books in Spanish for schools with Hispanic families. Parents check out books to read to and with their children. Staff members give parents guidance for reading with their children, reinforcing their children's use of reading strategies (Clay, 1991), and locating resources for specific family issues. Parental reinforcement of children s use of independent reading strategies is designed to align with the school district s reading instructional approach for primary grade students. The BCP staff also assists parents in choosing the appropriate level of book for their child, who selects a free book on every

visit to the program. The BCP, therefore, can result in the eventual accumulation of a sufficient number of books to create a home library.

A number of features, based on research and previous experience with parent involvement activities, formed the foundation of this parent involvement initiative:

1. a parent-friendly atmosphere that nurtures the parent-staff relationship
2. guidance for obtaining resource help for family issues
3. guidance to parents on promoting literacy development
4. promotion of parent-child reading interaction at home by offering incentives, such as free books
5. monitoring of home literacy activities through informal questioning

Family Participation

For the eight elementary schools (preschool through fifth grade) and one early childhood education center using the BCP, participation increased from 184 students in 1996 to 1,876 in 2002. From 1996 to 2001, there were 1,978 children whose families used the program, averaging 12 visits a year. Attendance has varied from family to family, with some families attending a few times a year and other families attending on an almost weekly basis. Attendance has varied by the child s grade level and school. For the 2001-2002 school year, participation by grade level ranged from a low of 107 fifth grade students to 374 kindergarten and 384 first grade students. Almost 40% of all children in kindergarten through third grade participated in 2002, with school level participation ranging from a low of 20% at one school (which was undergoing construction throughout the year) to a

high of 58% at another school. District wide, the number of participating students has increased each year the program has been implemented.

Evaluation of Program Outcomes

In the years since its inception, the BCP has garnered the support of local teachers and administrators. Recent survey results indicated that 95% of teachers and administrators familiar with the program believe that it is effective in increasing parent involvement in their child s reading development. Nonetheless, if effective, such a program should produce measurable results differentiated by level of parent participation. To this end, an evaluation was undertaken to examine the difference in the following outcomes between families with a high level of participation in the BCP and families with minimal participation: frequency of parent-child home reading activities, child s attitude toward reading, and child s reading achievement level.

The evaluation sample included 792 students in the first through fifth grades. The number of students by grade level ranged from 135 in the fifth grade to 206 in the second grade. Fifty-four percent were male. Fifty-two percent qualified for the federal lunch program. The racial composition, similar to the entire school district, was as follows: 81% White, 10% African American, 5% Hispanic, 2% Asian, and 3% representing other racial-ethnic groups. One hundred twenty-two, or 15%, were students identified as learning-disabled through the Exceptional Student Education program. The sample composition approximated an equal division by participation in the BCP: 398 were from families with a frequent level of participation, while 394 were from minimally participating families. Frequently participating (FP) families were defined as those families (n=326) attending at least 10 times in the current year, 15 times over the last two

years, or at least 25 times over three or more years. Minimally participating (MP) families were families (n=346) attending three times or less.

To address the research topic under study, data were collected to examine differences between FP and MP families in three outcome areas: parent behaviors with children at home, children s attitude toward reading, and children s reading achievement. The frequency of certain parent-child interactions and parent activities related to literacy development was assessed through a self-report parent survey. Children s attitude toward reading was assessed with the Elementary Reading Attitude Survey (McKenna & Kear, 1990), an empirically based attitude scale assessing attitude toward reading in general as well as recreational and academic reading. To examine children s reading achievement, first and second grade student reading was assessed with the Developmental Reading Assessment (Beaver, 1997), an assessment using leveled passages to derive information on word recognition rate and comprehension using retelling to determine a student s reading level. Classroom teachers were also asked to rate students classroom reading performance. Reading achievement data for third, fourth, and fifth grade students were collected from the results of the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT, 1997), a state test used for individual student and school accountability purposes. The FCAT comprises two tests at each grade level assessed: a criterion-referenced test using a selected and constructed response format measuring student mastery of the Sunshine State Standards and a norm-referenced test using a selected response format.

Analysis of the results revealed differences between the FP and MP families on the three outcome variables: parent home activities, child s attitude toward reading, and child s reading achievement. All significant results reported were significant at the .01

level. Effect size (ES), a way of quantifying the magnitude of the difference between the groups, ranged from moderate (.3-.5) to large (≥.5) for significant group differences.

Parent Home Literacy Activities

Regarding parent home activities, 59% of the sample parents completed the survey (FP 71%, MP 48%). Results indicated that FP families read with their children an average of almost five times a week, compared to less than three times a week for MP families, a significantly greater frequency (ES=.6). In addition to reading with their children, FP parents also read significantly more often to their children, five times a week compared to 3.5 times a week for MP parents (ES=.5). Although FP parents more frequently engaged in other activities, such as asking their children about what they are reading and discussing their own reading experiences, group differences were not statistically significant.

Child s Attitude Toward Reading

Results from the Elementary Reading Attitude Survey also revealed some group differences between FP and MP families. Children from FP families were significantly more positive toward reading in general (ES=.4), recreational reading (ES=.3), and academic reading (ES=.3). Specific activities in which FP children were more positive than MP children included getting a book, spending free time reading, reading in school, and reading out loud in class (ES=.3). Results for the last activity are particularly interesting because a number of students felt so strongly about this activity that they wrote on their survey form that they felt sick when asked to read out loud in class. Consequently, developing children s confidence for this activity may have direct

implications for their level of comfort in the classroom. Overall, children from FP families were clearly more positive about reading than MP children.

Child s Reading Achievement

The examination of group differences in reading achievement between FP and MP children yielded an overall trend of higher achievement for FP children. Developmental Reading Assessment results showed that 80% of the first grade FP students and 79% of the second grade FP students were reading at or above grade level compared to 78% of first grade and 44% of second grade MP students. Group differences were significant at the second grade level (ES=.7). Results of classroom teacher ratings of MP students showed that 89% of first graders and 82% of second graders were rated as performing at or above grade level in reading in a classroom setting. When asked to rate MP students, classroom teachers reported that 76% of first graders and 51% of second graders were operating at or above grade level reading in the classroom. On the Reading section of the FCAT, which assesses mastery of state-prescribed performance standards, third, fourth, and fifth grade students from FP families scored higher than their counterparts from MP families. Group differences were significant for third grade (ES=.5) and fourth grade (ES=.6) students. On the FCAT norm-referenced test for reading, FP students again scored higher than the MP students. Mean national percentile ranks for third, fourth, and fifth grade FP students were 67, 61, and 62, respectively. Percentile ranks for third, fourth, and fifth grade MP students were 52, 45, and 49, respectively. Group differences were again significant for the third grade (ES=.5) and fourth grade (ES=.4) levels. Overall, children from FP families demonstrated higher

reading achievement than children from MP families with group differences significant for second, third, and fourth grade students.

Family and School as Literacy Partners

This research examined some outcome variables related to participation in a parent-involvement program designed to foster parent-child home reading interaction based on the development of independent reading strategies. Results from an examination of families participating in the BCP revealed some important differences between families who are minimal participants and those who participate more regularly. Families with more regular attendance had parents who read to and with their children more often. Their children tended to be more positive about reading in school and for recreation and were more confident when called on to read in class. These children tended to have higher levels of reading achievement than their peers from families with minimal participation in the program.

Although causation cannot be derived from the type of research design used in this evaluation, some conclusions are suggested from these findings. In this parent initiative, parents were trained to implement strategies supporting classroom reading instruction through home reading activities. It is reasonable to conclude that parents and school staff working in unison can contribute more to a child s reading progress than either group working in isolation. This initiative has produced evidence that, given a parent-friendly environment, parents and school staff can work in a meaningful partnership for the improvement of student learning, which, in this case, facilitates children s reading development. In the future, such collaboration may be required on a

regular basis to help meet the high performance standards for all students mandated by recent federal legislation.

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Table 1. Parent Survey Results

Activity "How often do you do the following...)	Book Checkout Group*	N	Mean Days Per Week**	Standard Deviation	t	df	p***
(1) Read to your child.	FP	279	4.3	2.6			
	MP	182	2.9	2.5	5.9	392	<.008
(2) Read with your child.	FP	279	4.8	2.4			
	MP	182	3.6	2.6	5.3	459	<.008
(3) Ask your child questions what he/she read.	FP	278	4.5	2.4			
	MP	181	4.0	2.5	2.2	457	0.03
(4) Read in front of your child (magazines, newspapers)	FP	280	4.7	2.6			
	MP	180	4.0	2.7	2.6	458	0.01
(5) Talk with your child about an article or story that you read.	FP	275	3.1	2.3			
	MP	180	2.7	2.4	1.7	453	0.08
(6) Help your child with home work.	FP	278	6.4	1.6			
	MP	181	6.0	2.0	2.2	457	0.03
(7) Check your child's homework.	FP	278	6.7	1.2			
	MP	182	6.4	1.6	1.9	458	0.06
(8) Talk with your child about an article or story that you read.	FP	280	6.8	0.9			
	MP	182	6.6	1.3	1.8	460	0.07
(9) Talk to your child about his/her performance in school.	FP	280	6.0	1.9			
	MP	182	5.9	2.2	1.0	460	0.31
(10) Talk about a television program with your child.	FP	280	3.5	2.4			
	MP	180	3.6	2.7	0.5	458	0.59
(11) Talk with your child about current events.	FP	279	3.9	2.5			
	MP	181	3.8	2.7	0.1	458	0.95
(12) Do activities chosen by your child such as playing games or practicing sports.	FP	279	3.5	2.2			
	MP	182	3.4	2.4	0.5	459	0.63

* (FP) Frequently participating families; (MP) Minimally participating families

** Based on frequency scale values: Daily (7), 2-3 times per week (3), Once per week (1), 1-3 times per week (.11), Once every few months (.01)

*** p-value standard based on a modified Bonferroni adjustment accounting for inter-item correlations ($p \leq .008$)

Table 2. Recreational Reading Item Results, Elementary Reading Attitude Survey

Item	Book Checkout Group*	Mean**	Standard Deviation	t	df	p***
(1) How do you feel when you read a book on a rainy Saturday?	FP	3.1	0.8			
	MP	2.9	0.8	0.7	473	0.09
(2) How do you feel when you read a book in school during free time?	FP	3.3	0.8			
	MP	3.2	0.9	2.0	473	0.05
(3) How do you feel about reading for fun at home?	FP	3.3	0.8			
	MP	3.2	0.9	2.2	473	0.03
(4) How do you feel about getting a book for a present?	FP	3.6	0.6			
	MP	3.4	0.9	2.9	316	<.005
(5) How do you feel about spending free time reading?	FP	3.2	0.8			
	MP	2.9	0.9	3.1	473	<.005
(6) How do you feel about starting a new book?	FP	3.5	0.7			
	MP	3.5	0.6	1.1	473	0.28
(7) How do you feel about reading during summer vacation?	FP	3.0	1.0			
	MP	2.8	1.0	2.1	393	0.04
(8) How do you feel about reading instead of playing?	FP	2.3	1.0			
	MP	2.1	1.0	2.0	473	0.05
(9) How do you feel about going to a bookstore?	FP	3.7	0.5			
	MP	3.6	0.6	2.0	369	0.04
(10) How do you feel about reading different kinds of books?	FP	3.6	0.6			
	MP	3.5	0.6	1.6	473	0.1
TOTAL - Recreational Items	FP	32.5	4.6			
	MP	31.0	5.1	3.4	473	0.001

* (FP) Frequently participating families n= 285; (MP) Minimally participating families n=190

** Based on "Garfield" scale values: Very, very happy (4), Happy (3), Unhappy (2), Very, very unhappy (1)

*** p-value standard based on a modified Bonferroni adjustment accounting for inter-item correlations ($p \leq .005$)

Table 3. Academic Reading Item Results, Elementary Reading Attitude Survey

Item	Book Checkout Group*	Mean**	Standard Deviation	t	df	p***
(11) How do you feel when the teacher asks you questions about what you read?	FP	3.1	0.8			
	MP	2.9	0.9	1.6	473	0.11
(12) How do you feel about doing reading workbook pages and worksheets?	FP	3.0	1.0			
	MP	2.7	1.0	2.7	473	0.01
(13) How do you feel about reading in school?	FP	3.5	0.7			
	MP	3.3	0.7	3.0	473	<.006
(14) How do you feel about reading your school books?	FP	3.3	0.7			
	MP	3.2	0.7	2.7	417	0.01
(15) How do you feel about learning from a book?	FP	3.6	0.7			
	MP	3.6	0.6	0.5	473	0.66
(16) How do you feel when it's time for reading class?	FP	3.3	0.8			
	MP	3.2	0.9	1.7	473	0.09
(17) How do you feel about the stories you read in reading class?	FP	3.4	0.7			
	MP	3.3	0.7	1.8	473	0.08
(18) How do you feel when you read out loud in class?	FP	3.0	1.0			
	MP	2.7	1.1	2.9	390	<.006
(19) How do you feel about using a dictionary?	FP	3.0	0.9			
	MP	2.8	1.0	2.4	473	0.02
(20) How do you feel about taking a reading test?	FP	3.2	0.9			
	MP	3.1	1.0	1.6	473	0.12
TOTAL - Academic Reading Items	FP	32.3	5.1			
	MP	31.0	4.9	3.5	473	<.001
TOTAL - All Items	FP	64.8	8.9			
	MP	61.6	9.1	3.8	473	<.001

* (FP) Frequently participating families n= 285; (MP) Minimally participating families n=190

** Based on "Garfield" scale values: Very, very happy (4), Happy (3), Unhappy (2), Very, very unhappy (1)

*** p-value standard based on a modified Bonferroni adjustment accounting for inter-item correlations ($p \leq .006$)

Table 4. Developmental Reading Assessment Results

Grade	Book Checkout Group*	N	Median DRA Level**	Percentage On or Above Grade Level***	Mann-Whitney U	p
One	FP	74	20	86%		
	MP	54	20	78%	1739.0	0.21
Two	FP	113	34	82%		
	MP	83	24	51%	2598.0	<.01

* (FP) Frequently participating families, (MP) Minimally participating families
** DRA reading level performance ranged from 2 to 44.
*** Designated grade level performance on the DRA: first grade (16), second grade (28)

Table 5. Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test Results

Grade	Book Checkout Group*	N	Mean Scale Score**	Standard Deviation	t	df	p
Test Assessing the Sunshine State Standards (SSS)							
Three	FP	87	312	54.4			
	MP	78	286	59.1	3.0	163.0	<.01
Four	FP	53	314	55.2			
	MP	69	281	59.9	3.1	120.0	<.01
Five	FP	50	295	57.5			
	MP	70	274	60.8	1.9	118.0	0.06
Norm-Referenced Test (NRT)							
Three	FP	87	636	41.7			
	MP	78	617	39.6	3.0	163.0	<.01
Four	FP	53	648	45.2			
	MP	69	631	38.0	2.3	120.0	<.05
Five	FP	50	664	32.9			
	MP	70	651	38.0	1.9	118.0	0.07

* (FP) Frequently participating families, (MP) Minimally participating families
** SSS scale scores range from 100-500; NRT scale scores range from 424-863.

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